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Understanding national identity as doing *and* being

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No book in recent memory has provided such a comprehensive overview of the multiple contents and variable contexts of national identity than David McCrone and Frank Bechhofer's *Understanding National Identity* (2015). The book's focus is on Scottish, English, and British national identities, but the diverse methods it employs and the theoretical insights it generates resonate far beyond these narrower empirical confines. The book is the culmination of decades of theoretically driven and empirically grounded collaborative research on national identity. Their commitment to and investment in national identity research can be felt in the breadth and depth of the analysis presented here.

Taking their cue from Erving Goffman's *Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (Goffman, 1959), McCrone and Bechhofer posit that national identity should be understood in performative terms, as something people "'do... within particular contexts' (2015: 14-18, 25-26). '[I]t would be helpful' they advise, 'to get away from "identity" (as a noun), implying that it is a badge which affixes to people, describing who they *are*, as it were, and treat it more as a verb, 'to identify with', which implies a more active process of doing, which varies according to context' (2015: 17). Their focus is on identity-as-doing; they are critical of identity-as-being for not infrequently relegating identity as unknowable or inaccessible, hidden from the gaze of prying researchers 'in the deeper recesses of the mind' (2015: 13, quoting Miller 1995: 18, see also Billig, 1995). The 200 pages of data and analysis in this book confirm that national identity is not only eminently observable, but knowable as well. For McCrone and Bechhofer, national identity is not 'below consciousness', off the radar, or inaccessible to empirical investigation, but rather located in the context specific and explicit practices of ordinary people.

But is this really an either/or proposition? Are being and doing mutually exclusive modalities of identity? McCrone and Bechhofer's scepticism toward identity-as-being is fuelled partly on pragmatic terms (because they want to access and know identity), but also partly on conceptual grounds (because they believe identities are made explicit through their everyday invocations and performances). But if there are contexts, as McCrone and Bechhofer suggest, where people do identity, then definitionally there must also be other contexts where people do *not* do identity. What happens to identity in those contexts? Does it disappear altogether, before spontaneously popping up in the next context? Surely it's possible to conceive of a latent identity, one (temporarily) hidden in the crevices of the unconsciousness, silently and stealthily guiding thought and action without being the explicit focus of that thought and action (Billig, 1995, Edensor, 2002). In other contexts, that same identity can come to the fore in explicit articulations and performances, where identity is self-consciously and purposefully manipulated for specific purposes (McCrone and Bechhofer, 2015, see also Fox and Miller-Idriss, 2008). McCrone and Bechhofer are correct, following Miller (1995), that identity-as-being is often inaccessible from view. But this pragmatic problem with locating identity shouldn't translate *a priori* into a conceptual problem with how we understand identity. Rather, this is merely a methodological challenge to develop research strategies to tease out otherwise inaccessible identities. If anyone is positioned to come up with innovative techniques to reveal this otherwise inaccessible national identity, then that would have to be David McCrone and Frank Bechhofer.

Without acknowledging it, I think this is what they've actually done in their book. They show us identity being performed, but they also show us identity simply being. To be sure, their emphasis is squarely on the former. The data they present, both qualitative and quantitative, consist of ordinary people doing things with their national identities (generally talking and ticking boxes). But whilst on one level it's clear that their respondents are freely invoking their identities, on another level the

same data might be reinterpreted to tap into that more elusive and typically unnoticed version of national identity that others have claimed is inaccessible (see Fox, 2016).

On the one hand, McCrone and Bechhofer are doing exactly what it says on the tin: they're generating and analysing evidence of national identity as a claim (McCrone and Bechhofer, 2015: 25, 17-18, see also Calhoun, 1997: 5), as something that is 'performative and presentational' (2015: 25, see also Edensor, 2002-90), and sometimes as something 'tactical' (2015: 25, see also Wodak et al., 1999: 31-35). This version of identity does not operate below consciousness, but is self-consciously manipulated in certain contexts for specific purposes. McCrone and Bechhofer thus situate their analysis of identity in different overlapping and intersecting macro-structural and micro-interactional contexts. In Chapter 4, the town of Berwick-upon-Tweed, situated on the border of Scotland and England, supplies the territorial, political, and geographical contexts for local residents' accounts of their identities. Embedded within these larger spatial and structural contexts are multiple mundane contexts that also prompt their own bespoke versions of national identity. There are the interactional contexts of work, family and marriage; the conversational contexts of joking, accented speech, and bickering; the organisational contexts of local building codes, having babies, sport, and shopping. These varied contexts do not produce a one-size-fits-all version of national identity, but multiple complementary and sometimes contradictory versions of identity.

Other chapters tackle other contexts. Chapters 6 and 8 consider (in different ways) the political (and politicised) contexts of national identities. Chapter 7, in contrast, explores the situational contexts of identity, and specifically how the national 'self' can become (more) apparent when confronted with the national 'other' (see also Triandafyllidou, 1998 on this point). What national identity means in these different contexts depends on where and when it is invoked. Individually and collectively what we see in these various examples is people doing their national identities in different ways and in varied contexts. This is what McCrone and Bechhofer promised to deliver in their book, and they did.

But they did more: they also offered us a glimpse into this mostly unexplored realm of the unselfconscious. This is national identity not as a claim or performance, not strategically deployed, nor creatively manipulated; this is national identity as an unselfconscious set of nationally specific norms, values, and understandings that underlies and informs social life without (usually) being talked about in a self-conscious manner. These are the reflexive habits (and habitus; see Edensor, 2002: 88-98) of identity, the doxic experience (and non-experience) of a nationally inflected world (see Karner, 2005: 223-36). In McCrone and Bechhofer's choice of vocabulary, this might be the rules and grammar of national identity (2015: 30-31) that allow, without question, people to simply *be* national (Eley and Suny, 1996). As one of their Scottish interviewees put it, national identity was 'like breathing, you do it' (2015: 52-53). This is national identity as an involuntary reflex. This isn't identity's frontstage of 'impression management' but its backstage, 'more concerned with the reproductive functions of everyday life' (Edensor, 2002: 89).

This backstage version of national identity, whilst not entirely inaccessible, does pose certain methodological challenges. But that doesn't mean we should write it off as inaccessible, or worse, non-existent. It's there, just beneath the surface, and it can be examined empirically, though with a different methodological toolkit. Experimental psychologists have thus developed laboratory techniques to show how national identity operates subliminally (Carter et al., 2011, Hassin et al., 2009); ethnomethodologists have explored how identities inform talk-in-interaction without becoming the explicit conversational focus of those interactions (Hester and Housley, 2002); and many other social scientists have occasionally happened upon more taken-for-granted variations of national identity through the identity breaches that sometimes occur in their data (see, eg, Skey, 2011).

McCrone and Bechhofer also uncover evidence of this backstage version of identity in at least two ways. First, they get a glimpse backstage when identities are challenged in some way. National identities that normally do not need to be articulated are articulated when they are threatened. In ethnomethodological terms, this is a breach (Garfinkel, 1967). For Garfinkel, breaches make visible the 'background expectancies' of social interaction (Garfinkel, 1967: 36, 41-42); for McCrone and Bechhofer, it's the 'rules and grammar' of national identity that are generally glimpsed only in their transgression, where... claims are made which are judged illegitimate. In this way they resemble many social norms on how to behave... where only transgression makes the "rule" explicit' (2015: 98, see also 120). The otherwise implicit racialised rules of Scottish identity come out in an interview with a Scottish man who describes one such breach. For him, Scottish identity was '...not something that you notice until you are faced with someone who isn't white.' Then he described a meeting with an ethnically Chinese man who claimed a Scottish identity.

Meeting someone who is ethnically Chinese with a Scottish accent was like a revelation, because he didn't look like he sounded. And I found it quite hard, he called himself Scottish and he wore kilts and he did Scottish things and he looked Chinese. And it took a bit to adjust to it. Whereas if he'd said I'm British I would have said, 'yeah, fine'. But he said 'I'm Scottish' and I thought 'oh no you're not' (McCrone and Bechhofer, 2015: 105).

The ethnically Chinese appearance of this man claiming (or performing) a Scottish identity upset the interviewee's theretofore taken-for-granted assumption that being Scottish meant being white. The implicit thus became explicit: 'If I see a white person who says that they are Scottish I don't think about it at all I just accept it. If I see someone with a different colour who says that they are Scottish I do think about it' (McCrone and Bechhofer, 2015: 105).

There are other examples as well, though perhaps less dramatic. The othering described in chapter 7, for instance, might be understood as a kind of breaching experiment, *writ large*. National identities that lay dormant much of the time come to the fore when confronted (or challenged) by the national other. People are called to account for their own identity in national terms once the national cards are on the table. McCrone and Bechhofer arrive at these and other examples not by design but by chance. But whilst their intention was not to breach national identity, some of the topics they discussed with their research subjects functioned as breaches. These are breaches that are uncovered (or can be uncovered) in the data we analyse (Skey, 2011).

The second way McCrone and Bechhofer generate evidence of an unselfconscious national identity is through their survey research. McCrone and Bechhofer put surveys to good use to assess how people rank identities, how they understand their multiple identities, and the quality and intensity of those different identities. Surveys thus provide detailed snapshots of the scope, content, and strength of national identities. Surveys are however less useful for assessing how people 'do' their identities. The aggregate identities culled from survey research do not reveal identities-in-action, but rather identities momentarily frozen in time and space, detached from the everyday contexts they sometimes serve. They measure not what people do, but who people are.

McCrone and Bechhofer took a critical view of this latter, more static, version of identity. But I'd like to suggest that one beneficial unintended consequence of their survey research is that it can also be interpreted as capturing some of these more otherwise 'inaccessible' and 'unknowable' versions of identity. There are three ways this occurs.

First, surveys generate not thoughtful, elaborate responses, but rather quick, snap judgements (often from a finite universe of fixed choices). As such, they provide a comprehensive but condensed overview of the many different dimensions of national identity. The questions that confront survey respondents bear little resemblance to the way identity questions arise in their everyday lives. But the answers they give are nevertheless meaningful. The boxes they tick don't provide space for nuance or texture, but rather require quick, quasi-automatic, reflex-like responses (see, eg, Li, 2013: 120-24, Bonikowski, 2016: 438, Fox, 2016: 16). And because the answers are not premeditated, they give us a glimpse into the netherworld of national identity as who we are.

Second, and relatedly, the data generated through surveys are decontextualised. Surveys are not part of everyday interaction; indeed, they momentarily suspend those unspoken rules and replace them with a new grammar of interaction. We don't normally rank people according to nationality, meditate on our multiple identities, or otherwise narrate the national self in the course of our everyday comings and goings. But surveys ask us to do just these things in a contrived research environment. They thus detach the content of national identity from its context: they show us what people think about their national identities without telling us when or where they think about their national identities. People's capacity for answering these questions show us that national identity has meaning for them, even when they're not 'doing' those identities in context-specific ways.

Third, survey data are also depersonalised. Whilst the detail of interviews comes from the in-depth exploration of single questions, the detail of surveys is gleaned from all the questions posed to the entire sample. Survey results matter in the aggregate, detaching the data from the individual and placing it 'out there', in the ether, a sort of disembodied national identity available to all.

It may not have been their intention, but McCrone and Bechhofer are on to something here. The survey data and analysis they presented provide us with a window into some of those dimensions of identity that Miller (1995: 18, quoted in McCrone and Bechhofer, 2015: 15) claimed is either inaccessible or unknowable. McCrone and Bechhofer dismissed this claim on both pragmatic and conceptual grounds. They then showed us identity is both accessible and knowable when it is performed. But they also showed us that identity is accessible and knowable when it's not performed, when it simply is. They delivered more than they promised.

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